

Brands Driving Sociopolitical Change

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*Activism in Promoting Societal
and Environmental Attitudes*

By

Alexandra Miguel and Sandra Miranda

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ACRONYMS

BE – Business Ethics
CC – Corporate Citizenship
CCO – Communicative Constitution of Organizations
CEO - Chief Executive Officer
CSC – Communication for Social Change
CSP – Corporate Social Performance
CSR – Corporate Social Responsibility
DJSI – Dow Jones Sustainability Index
EIRIS – Ethical Investment Research Service
ESG – Environmental, Social and Governance
GRI – Global Reporting Initiative
ICT - Information and Communication Technologies
ILO - International Labor Organization
ISEA - Institute of Social and Ethical AccountAbility
ISO – International Organization for Standardization
NAFTA – North American Free Trade Agreement
NGO – Non-governmental organization
OECD – Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
ROI – Return on Investment
SAI - Social Accountability International
SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals
SRI – Stanford Research Institute
UN – United Nations
UNICEF – United Nations Children’s Fund
USA – United States of America
VBA - Value, Balance and Accountability
WBCSD - World Business Council for Sustainable Development
WCED – World Commission on Environment and Development

INTRODUCTION

Strategic communication is an evolving area of study in the field of social sciences of communication and management, with several sub-branches and contiguous strategies emerging in recent decades. This is partly justified by the fact that strategic communication is a multidisciplinary field of knowledge, receiving inputs from corporate, political, ethical, and sociocultural areas of research, which contribute not only to the global nature of the field, but also to the maturation of the holistic way in which organizations currently communicate with their multiple stakeholders.

In academic terms, strategic communication can be defined as the purposeful use of communication of an organization to fulfill its overall mission towards different internal and external stakeholders (e.g., Hallahan et al., 2007). The concept underwent some refinements, in the sense of bringing it closer to a global and relational perspective that assumes and values a bidirectional impact between an organization and its stakeholders (e.g., Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; van Ruler, 2018). The emphasis is on the strategic application of communication and how an organization functions as a social actor, adjusting and involving itself in the development of its internal and external environment.

Strategic communication research thus aims to examine how organizations create and exchange meanings with the most diverse groups of stakeholders (e.g., consumers, employees, investors, governments, media, or society itself), as well as how they intervene in the creation of public culture and in the discussion of public issues. At the same time, in a globalized, informed, and attentive world, the relationship and communication between organizations and stakeholders began to increasingly include the exchange of meanings related to ethical issues and the debate on social matters that previously fit only within the spectrum of the relationship between State and citizens. Stakeholders have increasingly broad expectations on organizations, not only concerning the corporate or business perspective, but also regarding the responsibilities of organizations towards society. These groups expect and demand that an organization's ethical values are reflected in its conduct and that organizations take a stand on relevant sociopolitical issues, managing to affect the social conduct of organizations

and their legitimacy to operate (e.g., Buder & Kittinger-Rosanelli, 2021; Hoffmann et al., 2016; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

In this way, strategic communication currently involves the management of various social aspects, with organizations promoting a constant dialogue with their stakeholders, based not only on corporate issues, related to organizational effectiveness, but also on an ethical and social perspective. This dynamic led to the area of strategic communication becoming increasingly unified with diverse communicative social areas, even in the private business sector, such as communication for social change, social marketing, corporate social responsibility (CSR) and, more recently, brand activism.

The fact is that even in organizations without direct social purposes, such as product or service companies/brands, social responsibility issues started to have a big impact on managing a mutually beneficial relationship between brands and stakeholders and, consequently, a large number of companies began to include social aspects in their mission or in the values that govern their conduct. Scientific research and business application of communication strategies for social change in the context of economic markets, as well as the development of social marketing, cause-related marketing strategies and, above all, of CSR policies, has thus led to a greater discussion on business ethics and on the responsibilities that entrepreneurs (and their respective companies and brands) should assume towards society, two aspects that, until the 50s of the last century, were scarcely included in the strategic planning and decision-making of corporate management.

However, if the initial development of the CSR area was important for the reconceptualization of the social role of business, involving the fulfilment of the company's responsibilities towards society on an economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic level that are mainly related to the company's value chain (e.g., Carroll, 1991, 2008), over time it become increasingly evident the need to evolve towards other strategies that are more proactive and meaningful in addressing certain sociopolitical issues. In fact, the study and application of CSR has fallen within a philanthropic-strategic framework, in which companies are able to simultaneously achieve social and corporate objectives (Godfrey & Hatch, 2006). Under the umbrella of this perspective, several investigations have proven the positive impact of CSR initiatives on the organization's reputation (e.g., Adams, 2002), on the consumer's willingness to pay more (e.g., Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004) or even on the reinforcement of the organizational commitment to employees

(e.g., Brammer et al., 2007) and the improvement of the organization's financial performance (e.g., Wu, 2012), but there is no extensive research on the effective sociopolitical effects that corporate social policies can assume.

As such, progress in understanding CSR is evolving towards other theoretical concepts, with a greater focus on the social, economic, and political changes that the implementation and effective communication of these corporate social strategies can generate, as is the case of brand activism. Brand activism thus arises from the growing involvement of corporations in the response to global public issues, promoted by the increasing expectations of stakeholders for companies to take public positions on relevant matters to society, and to act to promote their improvement or resolution.

The concept was described by Sarkar and Kotler (2018) as a strategy in which organizations aim to promote, prevent, or direct social, political, economic and/or environmental reforms, with the aim of promoting or preventing social changes. According to the authors (2018), this concept goes beyond CSR, as it is not guided by marketing or corporate principles but by society. In this view, the company's mission is intrinsically linked to social change, addressing the biggest and most pressing issues facing society, many of which previously were only in the social and political domain, by raising awareness and encouraging attitudinal and behavioral changes to improve the defended causes.

Companies/brands can thus engage in activist actions covering different types of causes, such as social, environmental, legal, economic, political, or even organizational issues. On a social level, brand activism actions cover areas such as equality between groups (gender issues, LGBTQIA+ community, race, age, etc.) and other social and community issues, like education, immigration, or health. For its part, environmental brand activism covers all areas related to the management and conservation of the environment, such as environmental conservation, environmental laws, climate change or control of toxic gas emissions.

Thus, if for several decades large corporations, such as multinationals, have been lobbying government bodies and making donations in the most diverse areas, in recent years there has been a new trend, predominantly in the United States of America (USA), where Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), companies and brands are taking public stances on sociopolitical issues that have nothing to do with their lines of business or value chain,

including issues related to LGBTQIA+ rights, immigration, the environment or racial equality. In addition to publicly take a stand about the causes, these companies are also acting proactively to see these problems solved, for example by threatening to transfer business activities from places that pass controversial laws, by organizing demonstrations or strikes to claim certain issues or by creating their own projects to support the causes.

Given the nature of social change intrinsic to brand activism strategies, it is now urgent to adapt the theory inherent to this concept to analysis models that assess whether socially responsible business practices can effectively generate positive changes in society. In fact, some studies have already concluded that perceptions about the responsible and proactive conduct of a company, its capacity for fairness and caring for the general well-being of others, can not only lead to benefits for the organization itself, as previously mentioned, but can also generate positive social and environmental attitudinal and behavioral changes, both in consumers (e.g., Negrão et al., 2018; Romani & Grappi, 2014) and employees (e.g., Ahmed et al., 2020; Tao et al. 2018). This involves, for example, the reinforcement of attitudes in favor of society, that is, attitudes with an orientation towards others and the common good (e.g., Kroll & Vogel, 2013), and attitudes in favor of the environment, which entails a concern for the protection of natural environment and environmental issues (e.g., Bissing-Olson et al., 2013).

Such impact, in addition to being direct, can also occur indirectly, when boosted by strengthening the identification of the employee and/or consumer with the organization, which corresponds to the perception of unity between the employee/consumer and an organization/company (e.g., Sen et al., 2006), or by an emotional response to the perception of moral excellence called moral elevation (e.g., Vianello et al., 2010). On the one hand, an organization's activist actions associate the company with an image of strong responsiveness to society's needs, generating higher levels of identification that, in turn, can lead to outcomes such as pro-social and pro-environmental intentions and actual volunteering behaviors. For its part, moral elevation, which generates a motivation to carry out charitable actions, can be stimulated by a company's social or environmental practices and, consequently, lead people to adopt virtuous attitudes, reinforcing moral or pro-social/environmental motivations.

Despite the topicality and relevance of the area, there is still a great lack of research on the sociopolitical effects of brand activism, with most of these actions being implemented and studied in the USA (Chatterji & Toffel,

2018). However, this field of knowledge has a strong potential for research and application, not only because of the role that companies can play in contributing to positive and relevant social and environmental changes, but also because it is increasingly required by all stakeholder groups, who see organizations as entities with the power and duty to enhance social well-being. It is therefore up to companies to define and implement an authentic stance in relation to relevant sociopolitical issues that meet the social demands of their stakeholders, contributing to the creation of a greater identification of these with the organization and to a reinforcement of their moral elevation, with impact on their moral and social attitudes.

Exploring the role of brand activism in endorsing greater identification of employees and consumers with the company and in awakening their moral elevation and, consequently, in the promotion of attitudes in favor of society and the environment is a current subject of great relevance in academic and corporate terms, given the characteristics of contemporary markets. Faced with the increasingly competitive and demanding landscape of the business world, due to phenomena such as globalization, constant technological advances, greater social and environmental awareness of stakeholders and the greater amount of information available, it is imperative that brands strengthen their bond with stakeholders in a more humane way, meeting all their needs, including their sociopolitical concerns, and assuming a more proactive position in improving and resolving issues that afflict humanity. It is therefore important for brands to understand whether their social and environmental responsibility actions can effectively generate positive changes in the attitudes of their audiences towards society and the environment, so that they realize the role they can play in society and feel motivated to contribute to a more sustainable development.

CHAPTER 1

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AS AN INTERDISCIPLINARY AREA OF STUDY

Over time, it has become increasingly important for social actors and organizations to be intentional and thoughtful in their communication, in order to be heard and create understanding (Habermas, 1979; Hallahan et al., 2007). The strengthening of this importance reflects, in part, the changes that have occurred over the years in society and in its organizing principles (Falkheimer, 2014; Kunsch, 2018).

The global social, political and economic changes that took place at the end of the cold war in 1989, with the increase in the number of liberal democracies and the involvement of more countries in a market economy, not only supported new geopolitics but also enhanced phenomena such as globalization and technological revolution (Kunsch, 2018). While globalization has increased the power of influence between the various world economies, digitalization is reconfiguring demarcations between public and private domains, political and commercial communication, and allowing corporate leaders and their organizations to be constantly observed by third parties. Added to this is the dematerialization of society, namely the dematerialization of value creation and wealth in intellectual capital and intangible assets, which are essentially based on communication (Verčič, 2016). In the corporate world, this meant that organizations started to face a new world scenario, ruled by an unprecedented competitive economy and global markets that led to a greater need for differentiation, which today falls less on a differentiation by the product/service offered, but on the organization's intangible values and its legitimacy in relation to social, ethical, environmental and political issues (Eyada, 2020; Ihlen & Verhoeven; 2015; Mirzaei et al., 2022).

Managers and communication professionals began to abandon the traditional and instrumental one-way communication model with task-oriented content, having to dialogue and communicate complex phenomena such as visions, values, norms, goals, identity and organizational culture for a variety of public or interested parties (stakeholders), both internal

(e.g., employees and investors) and external (e.g., consumers, society, government agencies and interest groups) (Heide & Simonsson, 2011; Smith, 2020). Concepts such as transparency, individualism, analysis of information and data, notions of risk and media convergence have gained prominence in contemporary organizations, in a panorama in which relations with different stakeholders become more inclusive, complex, fragile, and often virtual (Hallahan et al., 2007; Kunsch, 2018). Internally, new configurations of work relationships are found. Continuous interactions and interconnection of different perspectives start to guide the communicative act within organizations, being crucial to build effective information and communication systems, either from top to bottom or between peers, to ensure efficiency (Falkheimer, 2014; Heide et al., 2018). This was greatly influenced by the shift from bureaucratic to post-bureaucratic organizations, which involved a move from organizations based on hierarchies, rules and close supervision to organizations built on loosely structured networks, management by values and visions, self-directed teamwork, and horizontal and participatory communication (Christensen & Christensen, 2018; Fairtlough, 2008). In turn, the participatory culture, enhanced by the development of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and defined by individual active consumption and by co-creation and feedback practices (Jenkins, 1992), gains a leading role in consumers' purchasing decisions, as well as in consumer movements, resistance, activism, and anti-consumption (Kozinets & Jenkins, 2021). Rumors, scandals, or comments are easily disseminated online, often beyond the control of organizations, affecting its reputation and consumer behavior, which made the cultivation of relationships a core asset for organizations (Cutlip et al., 2000). In addition, the progression to an increasingly demanding and vigilant society has imposed a greater corporate commitment with ethical behavior and actions that meet global needs, in order to build a positive and legitimate image and identity, for which isolated marketing and communication actions are insufficient (Lewis, 2019; Smith, 2020).

These transformations completely changed the institutional conduct, in the sense that the way organizations communicate with their audiences started to be seen as a fundamental and highly strategic area (Holmström et al., 2010; Kunsch, 2018). Today, organizations are becoming self-aware and gaining reflexivity and subjectivity, operating and communicating in increasingly mediated environmental structures (Verčič, 2016). In addition, the business world began to experience a certain difficulty in differentiating traditional communication activities, with professionals from various communication areas, such as public relations or marketing, adopting

common practices, which were previously used separately and exclusively by each of these specific areas. For example, marketers are now leading marketing programs related to causes that were previously the exclusive domain of public relations, such as social causes (Hallahan et al., 2007).

Hallahan (2004) addressed the convergence of communication management across disciplines, concluding that there are six activities (Management Communication, Marketing Communication, Public Relations, Technical Communication, Political Communication and Information/Social Marketing Campaigns) within organizations that share common purposes and whose objectives and strategies are similar (e.g., audience analysis, goal setting, message strategy, channel choice or program assessment), differing only by the implemented tactics (Hallahan et al., 2007). These communication fields were often covered by the term “Integrated Communication”, a marketing concept that encompasses all types of goal-oriented communication initiated by organizations to address any type of stakeholders and audiences (Zerfass et al., 2018). Hallahan (2004) proposed that these communication fields come to be included in a single concept – “Strategic Communication” – which differs from Integrated Communication for its broader scope, including for example the integration of business in a wide social environment, and by the focus on how an organization, as a social actor, communicates strategically through organizational endeavors (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Mitrović, 2019). The convergence of the media and the blurring of communication genres were demanding an effort on the part of organizations, especially the largest and most complex, to coordinate and integrate their communication practices, improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the organization through synergies and reduce redundancies, and Strategic Communication could cover that need (Hallahan, 2004).

At the same time, there were concepts such as public relations that suffered from a low recognition, being often associated with a set of techniques, instead of a strategic and professionalized area, and with the manipulation of public interests (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2010; Ewen, 1996; Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). Thus, and given the increase in methods used by organizations to communicate with stakeholders, there was a need to institutionalize the communicational practices of public relations and other communication management activities (Grunig, 2006), as well as to consider the communication activities of an organization from a strategic, integrative and multidisciplinary perspective that encompasses the various traditional communication disciplines (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015; Kunsch, 2018; Werder et al., 2018; Zerfass et al., 2018). As such, the

concept of Strategic Communication emerges, especially in the last few decades, as a unifying paradigm and discipline for analyzing the communications made by organizations, strengthening and redirecting the study of organizational communication in how organizations present and promote themselves and how organizations create comprehensive and synergistic relationship with their publics to achieve maximum support for the accomplishment of their mission (Heide et al., 2018; Mitrović, 2019).

In fact, and although the study and practices of Strategic Communication are still under development, there is already empirical evidence to substantiate the categorization of the concept as a discipline, as well as its interdisciplinary status (Nothhaft et al., 2018). Werder et al. (2018) examined the standard requirements to characterize and categorize disciplines from Stichweh's (2001) approach, concluding that strategic communication can be qualified as a disciplinary area, as it has: (1) a particular object of research (that is, the communication of organizations); (2) a body of accumulated specialized knowledge about the object of research (such as journals or handbooks); (3) theories and concepts that organize the accumulated knowledge (e.g., rhetorical arena, communication sphere or persuasion); (4) specific terminologies (such as the terms "strategic" and "agency"); (5) specific research methods (e.g., survey, content analysis or in-depth interview); and (6) institutional manifestation (in this case, academic programs and corporate departments). In addition, Werder et al. (2018) argue that Strategic Communication emerged according to the usual trajectory of disciplinary evolution. Specifically, a knowledge base existed, namely in public relations, marketing, organizational management, communication, sociology, and psychology, and, subsequently, the specialization and fragmentation of that knowledge base occurred (for example, in terms of crisis communication or CSR), giving rise to a single disciplinary focus. Its interdisciplinary status is achieved by the integration of interdependent contributions from various disciplines, which have built new knowledge and theoretical perspectives and converged in the field of study of Strategic Communication (Werder et al., 2018).

In this way, the four theoretical paradigms that, according to Hallahan (2004), characterize strategic communication are: (1) Corporate Communication, which is based on Business and Economics studies and was initially divided into two perspectives: Paul Argenti's (1998) Theory of Corporate Communication, representative of the American perspective and which linked the term exclusively to business communications, and European theory by authors like Riel (1995), which associated corporate communication with any organization (not necessarily a commercial one).

Both theories, however, associated corporate communication with the construction of a favorable identity, image, and reputation for organizations, using communications as a coherent whole to create efficiency and favorably manage the relationship with the groups of which the organization depends (Riel, 1995). Later, the term is associated with a holistic view of communication in the corporate and organizational environment, as a process that involves the organization's participation and negotiation with its publics (e.g., Hübner, 2007; Oliver, 1997); (2) Marketing, Advertising and Public Relations, which traditionally only encompassed the strategic and pragmatic effects of communication, but currently have been evolving towards more reflective approaches that incorporate communication management (Fill, 1999; Grunig, 1992; White, 1991); (3) Business communication skills, an area that dates back to the 1920s in the USA and focuses on the quality of communication processes as a utilitarian technique, with the study of pragmatic communication skills involved in the organization's effectiveness (Verčič, 1998) and in commercial transaction operations (Reinsch, 1996); and (4) Organizational communication, which combines the traditional study of rhetoric with the emerging social sciences, speech communication and communication science, mainly addressing the relationship between communication and the organization through the media, channels and networks, organizational climate and superior-subordinate communication (Putnam & Cheney, 1995).

In the same way, Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2015) and Nothhaft et al. (2018) argue that the field of strategic communication studies manifests itself in a multidisciplinary way, with contributions from disciplines such as Public Relations, Corporate Communication, Political Communication, Advertising, Marketing, Public Diplomacy, Health Communication, Intercultural Communication, among others. In a content analysis, Heide et al. (2017) displayed that the topics most frequently addressed in strategic communication research were communication management, planning, and related topics such as audience segmentation, message design, relationship building, campaigns, and evaluation. For their part, Werder et al. (2018) argue that strategic communication is based on several theoretical approaches, such as organization theory, leadership and management theory, communication theory, message effects, crisis communication, narrative theory, sociocultural theory, public relations theory, political science, communication philosophy, organizational communication, critical theory, branding, ethics and business, and reputation management. For Mitrović (2019), strategic communication compiles a wide range of complex and strategically important communications, such

as public affairs, advocacy, think-thank group's relations, communication with other expert bodies, political activities, public policy engagement, activism, or public diplomacy.

Despite its interdisciplinary scope, and as advocated by authors such as Frandsen and Johansen (2017) and Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2015), strategic communication is not just a term used to replace or reformulate communicational concepts or activities, some of which are not appreciated or suffer from a bad reputation. Although in the beginning it was used as a substitute for such concepts, strategic communication emerges as a distinct approach, focused on the communication process, which offers complementary insights and opens new fields for interdisciplinary research. Thus, since the 2000s, the concept has become quite popular among academics and professionals, emerging as a global field of research in communication (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Thomas & Stephens, 2015).

1.1 Defining the concept

Originally used only in niche areas, such as government and military communication programs (Paul, 2011), the term “strategic communication” started to be a reality in all types of public and private organizations, operating in areas as diverse as politics, civil society or business, to attract attention, create a favorable reputation and gain legitimacy among stakeholders (Falkheimer, 2014; Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Zerfass, 2009; Zerfass et al., 2018).

Therefore, the need to reflect on the meaning and operationalization of the concept of strategic communication became evident. The foundation of the International Journal of Strategic Communication (IJSC), in 2007, was a great contribution to the definition of the concept and recognition of strategic communication as an area of study, being today one of the most recognized journals of thought on the theoretical and practical development of strategic communication. The constant debate on the subjects discussed in this journal motivated the organization of the 1st Interdisciplinary Pre-Conference on Strategic Communication in 2011, whose conclusions were published in 2015, in *The Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication* (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015). In 2014, Heath and Gregory (2014) also edited a collection of key texts, *Strategic Communication* (Vols. I-IV).

Thus, some definition proposals started to appear despite the difficulty in finding a universal definition of Strategic Communication, given the

polysemy of the terms that compose it – “communication” and “strategy” (Carrillo, 2014; Thomas & Stephens, 2015).

From a strategic point of view, Moss and Warnaby (1998) argue that strategic communication describes the communication of the organizational leadership’s strategic vision to internal and external stakeholders, arguing that “communication” plays a significant role in the strategic process, and that “strategy” is relevant in organizational communication functions. Another of the first definitions of the concept appears in the literature on strategic communication and is given by Argenti et al. (2005, p. 61), who define strategic communication in the business area as the “communication aligned with the company’s overall strategy, to enhance its strategic positioning”. The strategic positioning places the company’s distinctive value in its business sector compared to its competitors (Carrillo, 2014), and for Argenti et al. (2005), the development of a strategic, integrated, and multilevel approach in communicating with all stakeholders is the most effective way for a company to be able to compete and succeed. For Argenti et al. (2005) and Carrillo (2014), strategic communication must be developed over the long term and involve all the company’s communication areas, even if each communication function responds to particular objectives and is directed to specific groups, through the most appropriate and effective channels for each group. Although all communications must be personalized according to the public and channel, in order to achieve its goals, these must always be consistent with each other and with the corporate overall strategy, to achieve a complete strategic impact (Argenti et al., 2005). This point of view is shared by Hatch and Schultz (2001) and Volk and Zerfass (2018), who argue that in strategic communication there must be an alignment not only between the communication strategy and the general organizational strategy, but also between all communication activities, including brands, images, symbols, messages or topics, and between them and the communication strategy, in order to achieve the organizational goals.

Nevertheless, the most widely cited definition of strategic communication would only emerge in 2007. In the seminal article “Defining Strategic Communication”, published in the inaugural edition of *IJSC*, Hallahan et al. (2007) define strategic communication as the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission, implying public involvement and participation in deliberative communicative practices on behalf of organizations, causes and social movements. In other words, strategic communication focuses on how an organization presents and promotes itself through the intentional communicative activities of its

leaders, employees, and communication professionals, trying to create shared meanings among its various stakeholders, and to understand possible factors that obstruct this sharing of meanings (Hallahan et al., 2007). This definition is in line with the definition of strategic communication by Sandhu (2009), who described strategic communication as an intentional communication that requires a purposeful actor and a rational and deliberate decision making to achieve certain objectives, such as the organization's survival.

According to van Ruler (2018), the definition by Hallahan et al. (2007) establishes the difference between communication that is strategic and communication that is not: only communication that is carried out with the intention of presenting and promoting an organization's mission can be considered strategic. Raupp and Hoffjann (2012) and Zerfass et al. (2018) are even more specific, arguing that communication is not strategic for an organization when it is about known operational and routine issues with well-established intervention tactics, although this type of communication can make important contributions to goal accomplishment. Zerfass et al. (2018) criticize the use of the term "purposeful" used by Hallahan et al. (2007) to describe strategic communication, since the tactical, operational and even routine communication of an organization also has a purpose, defining strategic communication as all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity.

Another criticism of the seminal definition of Hallahan et al. (2007) is the fact that the definition is based on a classic linear and instrumental vision of strategic communication, grounded on a rational and deliberate decision-making process and on the pragmatic results of communicative actions (Aggerholm & Thomsen, 2015; Löffelholz et al., 2015), in addition to not specifying how organizations can fulfill their mission and goals (Volk & Zerfass, 2018). Aggerholm and Thomsen (2015) argue that the intentional character of the definition of strategic communication by Hallahan et al. (2007) favors simplistic and linear communication exchanges between the organization and its stakeholders, in which the organization can impose its vision in a rational way. In contrast, the authors (2015) argue that all audiences have the ability to shape the organization through its strategic communication role and to interfere in the creation of meaning. van Ruler (2018) also argues that the role of Strategic Communication is not only the presentation and promotion of goals and strategies, but their continuous and reflective construction, negotiation, management, and reconstruction, taking into account the entire organizational environment.

Despite its wide-ranging and sometimes controversial character, the seminal definition by Hallahan et al. (2007) was a major driver for other authors to investigate the concept, beginning to explore, limit and debate the role, process, and function of strategic communication in organizations (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015; Werder et al., 2018; Zerfass et al., 2018). This led to a refinement of the definition of the concept, improving the notions of strategy, action, agency, and communication, and placed the phenomenon in the public sphere (Werder et al., 2018).

In 2013, Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2013, p. 74) try to specify the definition of strategic communication as “the practice of deliberate and purposive communication that a communication agent enacts in the public sphere on behalf of a communicative entity to reach set goals”. Although more specific, the authors (2013) still saw strategic communication as a tool to help achieve the organization’s goals, and not to create or recreate them. In turn, Christensen et al. (2008) offers another view, defining strategic communication as a mentality, a way of thinking and approaching communication as a strategic management function. Thorson (2013) also argues that the strength of the strategic communication approach lies in the understanding of communication and strategy in a holistic way, instead of specific tactics. In the same vein, Paul (2011) and Thomas and Stephens (2015) argued that strategic communication should not be limited to formal messages, since actions also convey meaning and, therefore, are also part of strategic communication.

Taking the concept of strategic communication from a holistic point of view, Falkheimer (2014), Grunig (2006) and Zerfass and Huck (2007) address the concept of stakeholders in the definition of strategic communication, arguing that strategic communication encompasses organizational representations, processes of legitimacy and the creation and management of meaning in all interactions with internal and external stakeholders, in an institutionalized way, to shape and reinforce collective perceptions. Strategic communication thus appears as a way to incorporate values and preferences in collaborative structures, being used to create and maintain the institutional elements in a consistent manner (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2014). This need to share meanings with stakeholders is due to the fact that organizations do not operate independently, but are inserted in a social network of rules, norms and cognitive assumptions, which form expectations about organizations that allow, shape or restrict strategic communication (Sandhu, 2009).

As such, the concept of reputation and trust has been closely associated with strategic communication, for example by Zerfass and Huck (2007, p. 108) who argue that strategic communication “shapes meaning, builds trust, creates reputation, and manages symbolic relationships with internal and external stakeholders in order to support organizational growth and secure the freedom to operate”. Likewise, Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2015) argued that the ultimate goal of strategic communication is to maintain the organization’s reputation in the public sphere.

Carrillo (2014, p. 78) presents a more complete definition of Strategic Communication in organizations, defining it as “the long-term communication management effort required of an organization, in its specific environment, so that its relationship with its stakeholders takes advantage of its evolution, in order to achieve its goals, established on the basis of the perspective and vision of its global strategy. A tactical action mechanism is operationalized, which is divided into communication action plans with a clear deadline, in order to achieve the defined goals”. This definition thus encompasses the perspectives of the organization, stakeholder participation, management, and the achievement of long-term goals, in a standpoint of continuous development and adjustment between the organization and its environment (Carrillo, 2014).

Thus, one can say that while the strategy literature mainly assigns a rather tactical and promotional function to strategic communication (e.g., Moss & Warnaby, 1998), the literature on strategic communication and public relations demands a more strategic and holistic role for communication in organizations (e.g., Grunig, 2006; Zerfass & Huck, 2007). Falkheimer (2014), Frandsen and Johansen (2017) and Kunsch (2018) denoted that, historically, strategic communication has been analyzed from a linear, instrumental, technical, and tactical perspective, in which communication was reduced to the transfer of information from the organization to internal and external stakeholders, in organizational environments free from culture and conflict. Strategic communication was linked to a pragmatic vision of communication, with a focus on efficiency, legitimacy, and results, in line with the organization’s global goals and the principles established in relation to its mission, vision and values (Kunsch, 2018). In addition, strategic communication was associated with a description of tactics and practices, with little space to contextualize the complexity and uncertainties of the environment and the social, economic, or political circumstances in which organizations operate, assuming that a good strategic planning would be able to achieve the desired results and

promote effective communication (Falkheimer, 2014; Kunsch, 2018; van Ruler, 2018).

Such ideals of control and centrality in the process of formulating and implementing strategic communication are associated with a modernist vision and began to be dissipated and replaced by a postmodern approach, according to which the strategic process is based on previous experiences and actions and involves the participation of all audiences (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). Holtzhausen (2000) is one of the authors who come to contradict the modernist vision of strategic communication, arguing that the conditions and contexts in which such communication takes place should be emphasized as it can shape communication, and that strategic communication should have in account the internal and external environment of the organization. While recognizing that in a capitalist system strategic communication needs to generate results, Falkheimer (2014), Frandsen and Johansen (2017), Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2015), Kunsch (2018) and van Ruler (2018) also conceptualize strategic communication from a post-modernist or critical approach, arguing that it should adopt a global and comprehensive perspective, that values human and social aspects and that serves as a starting point for a bidirectional communication between an entity and its stakeholders that is perpetuated over time. This vision sees strategic communication as “engaged in constructing society by making sense of situations, creating appropriate meanings out of them and looking for acceptable frameworks and enactments” (van Ruler & Verčič, 2005, p. 266). In this way, strategic communication started to involve not only the management of organizational issues, such as reputation and image, crisis management, positioning and leadership (Carrillo, 2014; Mahoney, 2011; Werder et al., 2018; Zerfass, 2009), but also other fields, such as social change and social action processes (van Ruler, 2018; Zerfass, 2009), opinion and behavior, democracy, culture (Falkheimer, 2014), corporate values (Mahoney, 2011) and CSR strategies (Mahoney, 2011; Werder et al., 2018; Zerfass et al., 2018).

The change to this holistic approach was, in large part, due to the evolutions that took place in the field of the two pillars that constitute strategic communication as a concept, that is, in the theories of communication and strategy (van Ruler, 2018; Thomas & Stephens, 2015).

1.1.1 Evolutions in communication theory

Since it is an integral part of the field and purpose of the area, communication and the theories associated with the concept are essential

for understanding the evolution of strategic communication (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; van Ruler, 2018). Initially, however, explicit references to communication as a fundamental part of the strategy process were rare and often incorporated into broader themes such as leadership and organizational cultures (e.g., Thompson, 1997), stakeholders (e.g., Lynch, 1997), or strategy implementation and control (Hax & Majluf, 1991).

The term “communication theory” refers to the body of theories that constitute the understanding of the communication process (Littlejohn, 1983). According to Rosengren (2000), communication concerns the process of creating meaning psychologically, socially, and culturally, that is, how messages are understood intellectually and how ambiguity arises and is resolved. This creation of meanings arises, according to Hallahan et al. (2007) and Nicotera (2009), through the interaction between the parties involved in the communication process. However, the concept of communication has not always been associated with the mutual construction of meaning. There are three main theories about how this process works that are essential to understanding the evolution of strategic communication.

According to the first theories of mass communication, communication was a unilateral process of meaning construction, in which the sender tries to construct or reconstruct the meaning perceived by the receiver (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). The Mathematical Communication Theory, developed by Shannon and Weaver (1949), has its origins in the developments of modern society and in the possibility of perpetuating information in time and space. This theory examines communication as a process of transmitting information between a sender and one or more recipients, and for the communication to be successful it would be enough to reach the recipient. In this model, interpretive factors or aspects of meaning creation were not considered, as the information is seen as objective and the capacity for feedback is limited. Within this perspective, other theories see communication as an attempt by a sender to produce a change in the meaning perceived by the receiver about a given situation. Emerging in the 1940s, the diffusion theory, also known as *Two-Step Flow* (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948) is one of the best-known theories in this area, emphasizing the role of opinion leaders in influencing the perception of the meanings of messages conveyed by the mass media in the community. Another important theory is the Personal Influence Model of Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), which considers that public opinion is mediated by interpersonal communication between members of each person’s own social environment. In this instrumental view, communication is something that managers do to achieve certain

goals, seeking to produce a mutual understanding for the decisions taken, and communication problems are only related to technical issues (Conrad & Haynes, 2001).

For much of the 20th century, transmission models served as the basis for conceptualizing organizations' communication activities (Hallahan et al., 2007). However, in the 1960s, Dance (1967) began to point out some criticism to Shannon and Weaver's (1949) unilateral transmission approach, considering it simplistic and rather sender-oriented, underestimating or ignoring the role of receivers in the process. At the time, Dance (1967) warned of the need to give relevance to feedback processes in communication theories, rejecting the linearity of the process. As such, several approaches to the concept of communication began to emerge that see it as a bidirectional process of construction and exchange of meanings between those involved, a process that is interactive in nature and participatory at all levels (Servaes, 1999). The interactive model of communication has its roots in symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) and in the cybernetic theory of Wiener (1948), who argued that communication processes can be seen in terms of action and reaction. This involves a paradigm shift from sender orientation to actor orientation, in which all actors involved in the communication process are active and capable of influencing each other (van Ruler, 2018). What is particularly important in this perspective for strategic communication is the fact that it has begun to be understood that shared meanings are built through a communication process, so the role of the strategic communicator is not just to send information through the most effective channel, but starting a dialogue that can act as a starting point for creating meaning between an organization and its stakeholders (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015). As such, in strategic communication, one of the most established interactive communication approaches is the Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO), pursued by authors like Weick (1979), Taylor and Van Every (2000) and Heide et al. (2018), according to which the construction of organizational reality is achieved through continuous sense making and communication processes among stakeholders, in which all of them negotiate and build meanings in an interactive way. In this sense, the CCO perspective states that organizations should not be perceived as something stable, constant, or objective (Weick, 1979) and communication cannot be reduced to a single profession or organizational function (such as corporate communication, public relations or marketing), because communication is a process that cuts across the entire organization and is constitutive of its very existence (Kuhn & Schoeneborn, 2015; Langenberg & Wesseling, 2016). In fact, already in the 1980s, Schall (1983) had

emphasized that organizations are created, sustained, transmitted, and changed through social interaction and communication.

This interactive communication model is similar to the third theory of communication processes: the ritual model of communication, developed by Carey (1975). The ritualistic model of communication is based on social constructivism and organizational communication, as well as on contemporary concepts such as co-creation or participatory culture, analyzing communication as a symbolic process through which reality is created, maintained, repaired, and transformed in a repeated and dynamic way. For Bursleson and Bodie (2008), constructivism presumes that humans actively interpret the world, building meaningful considerations about it and acting based on their interpretations. The constructivist theory of communication defends that communication is a social process of interaction and/or interpretation that gives sense and meaning to social reality, organizational actions, events and organizational roles and processes (Mazzei, 2010). This points out the ability of each member of an organization to enact processes to negotiate meanings and make the organization operate (Mazzei, 2010). Thus, this communication model is no longer focused so much on the interaction between actors as entities involved in communication, but on the construction of meanings in a continuous and omnidirectional way (van Ruler, 2018). Such meanings are created through interpretations made by senders and receivers, which are influenced by past experiences, situations and contexts and influence the meanings that participants attribute to a message and, consequently, the effects of the message itself (van Ruler, 2018; Weick, 1995). It is also for this reason that this perspective is sometimes called an evolutionary or transactional model (Stappers et al., 1990), once the construction of meanings is seen as a social and interpretive process that occurs as interactions take place. According to van Ruler (2018), this model is a significant addition to the CCO approach, as it focuses on the creation of meaning itself and, therefore, on the role of the organization in society, as one of the actors in the arenas of continuous meaning creation.

The arrival of the Internet also brought changes to communication processes, which are no longer restricted to unilateral flows and passive receivers, currently witnessing an interactive process, where the recipient is also a sender. In this sense, communication came to be considered as a basic social process and as a humanist phenomenon, encompassing relational aspects, the concept of subjectivity, contexts and the internal and external conditioning that involve the communication process (Kunsch, 2018). For the strategic planning field, this meant that communication

ceased to have only a tactical role, of aiding in the transmission, implementation and control of the strategy, facilitating its understanding and guaranteeing consensus (Hax & Majluf, 1991), but began to be seen as a key element in the strategic decision-making process, that is, as a strategic element itself (Kunsch, 2018; van Ruler, 2018). This is closely related to the notion that organizations are in a process of constant creation and maintenance, sustained through continuous communication (Gregory & Half, 2013; Marchiori, 2010; Weick, 1979). As such, strategic listening also assumes an essential role in organizations, as a way to understand changes in the environment more quickly, gaining strategic advantage over the competition (Macnamara & Gregory, 2018; Zeffass et al., 2018). In fact, through a case study of the strategic results of communication processes in an organization, Marchiori and Bulgacov (2012) concluded that an organization's communication processes are socially influenced and constructed, based on the practices of all stakeholders, continuously building common meanings that are collectively structured by communication.

However, as Falkheimer (2014) points out, although the dichotomy between transmission models and interactive or ritualistic models of communication can help to reflect on communication in different contexts, one should be aware that such dichotomy is a normative theoretical construction, not necessarily being incompatible in practice as there is always a certain level of persuasion in strategic communication. Likewise, Hallahan et al. (2007) emphasized the importance of being open to all conceptualizations of communication processes and effects, considering both the transmission model and the interactive communication model as relevant for the study of strategic communication.

1.1.2 Developments in the field of strategy

The concept of strategy comes from the military field, being concerned with tactics to achieve certain goals (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018; Mintzberg, 1987). Strategic is then naturally related to strategy – a description of how ends (i.e., goals) will be reached by means (i.e., resources), involving two processes: formulation (strategic planning and strategic thinking) and implementation (Freedman, 2013). In organization theory, the term “strategy” was first used in 1950 (Hatch, 1997), taking on an operational role that intended to describe how organizations compete in the marketplace, obtain competitive advantage and gain market share (Hallahan et al., 2007; Zeffass et al., 2018).